

# The Gospel of Barnabas: Bad News for Muslims and Christians

## I. Introduction

The wide availability and distribution of The Gospel of Barnabas demands a very careful scrutiny of its message and origin. The question its reading immediately raises is whether or not it is an authentic presentation of the accurate Gospel of Jesus. It purports to be the true gospel of Jesus, yet it is contrary to the Gospel record as accepted by Christians for centuries. Though the book is often regarded as authentic by Muslims, it is also contrary to the Qur'an and Islamic teaching. Because of these questions regarding its authenticity, it is necessary to examine The Gospel of Barnabas with care and objectivity to determine its true value for Christians and Muslims.

The purpose of this paper is to present in a limited fashion the results of the internal and external evidences which show that this gospel does not make a convincing or credible claim to be the authentic gospel of Jesus Christ. All references to The Gospel of Barnabas will be notated with the abbreviation GB followed by the numerical chapter of the book; e.g. (GB 52) for The Gospel of Barnabas, section 52.

## II. Internal Evidence

Internal evidence is the evidence supplied by the contents of the book itself. These contents are certain to bear the marks of a particular age and a cultural setting of the events they claim to record. The claim to authenticity will be sustained or rejected by its agreement with the historical setting, the substance and the consistency of the text.

### A. Historical setting

With even a superficial reading, The Gospel of Barnabas cannot be said to breathe the first century atmosphere. It bears too many traces of European Medieval times, some of which are:

1. The mention of casks of wood or barrels washed and refilled with wine (GB 152)\*. In the days of Jesus skins were used for wine. Casks or barrels of wood were unknown in ancient Palestine.
2. 'The Virgin' (GB 219) as a title was not given to the mother of Jesus before 300AD.

3. Expressions (words and phrases) well known in Italy from the Italian poet Dante who lived 1265-1321 are scattered throughout the book (GB 23, 59, 60, 78, 217).
4. Adam and Eve were commanded by God to do penance (GB 41), a practice of the Middle Ages, not of New Testament times.
5. Reference to court procedure of the Middle Ages is given where a prisoner is questioned by a magistrate while a notary records the evidence (GB 121).
6. Reference is also made to a duel between two rival lovers which reminds one of the age of chivalry In Medieval Europe (GB 99).
7. Among the clearest of all European traces are those of feudalism. The Gospel of Barnabas represents Mary, Martha and Lazarus as feudal lords of whole villages (GB 194, 122).
8. The picturesque description of the summer season in the fields and valleys (GB 169) is much more suggestive of beautiful Italy than of Palestine in summer when the fields are utterly burnt dry.
9. Asceticism and other traces of Medieval society, customs, times and beliefs appear throughout the book, e.g. (GB 150) taking the habit of a monk-like Pharisee and dwelling in seclusion for 30(?) years.

### III. Substance

A book such as The Gospel of Barnabas must stand or fall on the accuracy or inaccuracy of its statements and assertions in matters of historical, geographical, and physiological import (and others).

#### A. Historical Errors

The Gospel of Barnabas is filled with errors such as:

1. When Jesus was born 'Pilate was governor in the priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas' (GB 3). These men did not come to office until later - Annas 6 AD, Caiaphas 8 AD, Pilate 26 AD.
2. "...in the time of Elijah, friend and prophet of God, there were twelve mountains inhabited by seventeen thousand Pharisees..," (GB 145). There were no Pharisees in the days of Elijah. History first knows about Pharisees seven centuries later in the period between 135-104 BC.
3. The Gospel of Barnabas erroneously quotes Jesus as saying that the Year of Jubilee came every 100 years (GB 82, 83). From the time of Moses (Leviticus 25: 11 ) the Year of Jubilee came every 50 years. There was only one time in history

that the festival was known to have fallen in 100 year cycles. That was when Pope Boniface VIII (about 1300 AD) announced that it should be celebrated every 100 years. Pope Clement VI (1343 AD) rescinded Boniface's order and returned the celebration to every 50 years as it had always been. The Gospel of Barnabas was written, therefore, sometime after Pope Boniface 1300 AD for certain, not during the 1st century.

4. The Gospel of Barnabas records (GB 92) that Jesus and his disciples kept "the 40 days" at Mt. Sinai. The context clearly shows that this refers to the period of Lent before Easter. The Church meditates at this time on the suffering of Christ and his resurrection, which was obviously unknown when Christ was still alive. And it is most unlikely that Jesus and his disciples would have gone some 450 KM away to observe a fast of 40 days.
5. The Gospel of Barnabas (GB 80) has the Prophet Daniel only two years old when taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar. Since he interpreted the king's dream in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of the king's reign (Daniel 2: 1), this would make Daniel only 3 or at the most 4 years old at the time. This is an impossibility, for the king immediately made Daniel ruler over the entire province of Babylon. Daniel was then still a young man, but not that young.
6. It was Darius who committed the Prophet Daniel to the lions' den, not Cyrus as The Gospel of Barnabas (GB 50) states. Jesus as prophet would have been accurate in quoting from Daniel 6.
7. The Gospel of Barnabas (GB 54) has Jesus saying: 'For he who would get in change a piece of gold must have sixty mites.' The Italian version of the book divides the golden "denarius" into 60 "minuti." These coins were actually of Spanish origin during the Visigothic Period and betray a Spanish background to the manuscript.

## B. Geographical Errors

Geographically, the location errors are numerous and incredible, especially since Barnabas, the supposed author, was the constant companion of Jesus as he traveled about Palestine. Glaring errors abound, such as the following:

1. Jesus traveled to Nazareth by ship (GB 20). This cannot be, for Nazareth is on a hill in Galilee at 2000 ft. elevation and half a day's march from the sea.
2. The next section (GB 21) confirms the confusion where it is stated that Jesus went up to Capernaum (from Nazareth). Of course it is just the reverse. He would have landed at Capernaum (the seaport), gone up to Nazareth and then down again to Capernaum.

3. The mistake is further compounded, for the incident which is reported to have taken place in Capernaum in fact occurred on the other side of the lake (Sea of Galilee) in the region of Gerasenes (Mark 5: 1).
4. The same mistake is made again when Jesus comes to Nazareth (GB 143), gives a long uninterrupted discourse (GB 144-151 ) and then embarks on a ship (GB 151) and arrives (by ship?) at Jerusalem (GB 152), also far inland.
5. The Prophet Jonah (GB 63) mistakenly flees and sails to Tarsus (In present-day Turkey) instead of to Tarshish (present-day Spain) as in Jonah 1: 3.
6. Then the fish that swallowed Jonah cast him out near Nineveh (GB 63). It is well founded that Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire and was built on the eastern bank of the Tigris River, not on the Mediterranean coast.

### C. Errors of Exaggeration and Myth

The Gospel of Barnabas contains many absurd statements. Many of these are scientific impossibilities, others are historical or theological fantasies.

1. "Whereupon, as the food (apple?) was going down, he (Adam) remembered the words of God wherefore, wishing to stop the food, he put his hand into his throat, where every man has the mark" (GB 40). Putting a hand to the throat will not stop the passage of swallowed food. Also, what mark is this talking about?
2. "...the planets, that are distant one from another five hundred years' journey for a man; and the earth in like manner is distant from the first heaven five hundred years' journey (GB 178) or "four thousand and five hundred years" journey' (GB 105). These distances are in no way accurate but are rather fanciful conjectures.
3. "God having created a mass of earth, and having left it for twenty-five thousand years without doing aught else; Satan, who was as it were priest and head of the angels...knew that God of that mass of earth was to take one hundred and forty and four thousand signed with the mark of prophecy..." (GB 35). When has God ever left off caring for the earth? Also, Satan in no way can be considered a priest. Priests seek to reconcile man with God or gods by officiating over ceremonies and sacrifices. Satan in no way seeks to reconcile angels or men to God but seeks to foster rebellion toward God.
4. "Whereupon, in Mizpeh assembled three armies each one of two hundred thousand men that bare sword" (GB 91). These were Jewish armies, each believing something different about Jesus and ready for a three-cornered battle where each side would simultaneously take on the other two. But quieted by a word from the heathen governor and the high priest they all simply laid down their arms, embraced one another, saying "forgive me, brother." This story betrays itself as a phenomenal myth and fantasy, the author again resorting to wild

exaggerations of facts and numbers in an apparent attempt to create a wondrous impact on his readers. Where did the Jews suddenly find six hundred thousand swords? During the Roman occupation of Palestine no manufacture of military hardware was permitted. If indeed the Jews were 600,000 strong, Pilate would only have been too delighted to see them decimate one another. And rather than fight among themselves, 600,000 armed Jews could with ease have driven the hated Romans right out of Palestine. The whole Roman army in the world at that time numbered only half this figure (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1966 ed. Vol. 19, pp. 527,528).

5. Jesus intercedes in vain for God to pardon Satan. Then Jesus warns Satan: "Thou must know that the angel Michael must needs on the day of judgment strike thee with the sword of God one hundred thousand times and each blow will give thee the pain of ten hells" (GB 51 57). This punishment is fanciful and meaningless, especially when compared to the actual punishments predicted for Satan in the Bible.
6. On the day of judgment "...the demons and reprobates with Satan shall weep so that more water shall flow from the eyes of one of them than is in the river of Jordon" (GB 55). Again, this is a fanciful description that does not befit holy scripture.
7. On the day of judgment "...the hair-shirt shall shine like the sun, and every louse a man shall have borne for love of God shalt be turned into pearl" (GB 57). Where is mankind commanded or exhorted to bear with lice out of love for God?
8. Because of drought one says: "O brother, it is now two months since I have drunk water" (CB 144,149). This is a physical impossibility.
9. "Rome alone hath twenty-eight thousand gods that are seen" (GB 152). This is no doubt another effort to impress with exaggerated numbers (as well as in GB 21,178,179,199 and elsewhere). Rome had many gods and goddesses in its pantheon, but not 28,000.

## IV. Consistency

In any bona fide literary work consistency must be observed. Validity and honesty demand that the text be in consistent agreement with itself and with other authenticated sources of information.

### A. Is The Gospel of Barnabas consistent with itself?

This work has many inconsistencies. The most glaring inconsistency and self-contradiction is immediately seen in the author's title. The real Barnabas, native of Cyprus with Greek as his lifelong tongue, would certainly know that Christ (Greek) is the equivalent of Messiah (Hebrew). As a Cypriot Jew he would have known both languages

and would not title Jesus as Christ at the beginning and then proceed throughout his 'Gospel' to deny that Jesus is Messiah (GB Title, 42,82 & others). He errs again (GB 16) by having Christ Jesus born in Bethlehem and giving the title of Messiah to Muhammad who was born in Mecca.

Not only is there confusion regarding Jesus' title at birth but also concerning his death. Jesus alludes to his 'Lazarus-like' death and resurrection (GB 195). Jesus also says (GB 213): 'Blessed be thy holy name, O Lord, because thou has not separated me from the number of thy servants that have been persecuted by the world and slain.' Then the death of Jesus is elsewhere denied (GB 215 & throughout the book).

## B. Is the Gospel of Barnabas consistent with the Bible and the Qur'an?

Following are only some of its contradictions of one or of both:

1. Muhammad is referred to as the Messiah (GB 42). To be the Messiah, Muhammad would have to have been a Jew. Both the Bible (John 1:41) and the Qur'an (Al Imran 45; Maida 72) state that Jesus is the Messiah.
2. Mary gave birth to Jesus without pain (GB 3). The Qur'an (Maryam 23) states that Mary gave birth to Jesus with pain.
3. Only one wife is permitted (GB 115). The Qur'an says that a man may take 3 or 4 wives (Al Nisa 3).
4. The accounts of the Day of Judgement in the Qur'an and Gospel of Barnabas contradict each other (GB 53 vs. Surahs 'Abasa 80:33-37 and Al-Haqqa 69:13-18).
5. There are nine heavens (GB 105,178), following Dante. The Bible states three heavens (2 Cor. 12:2). The Qur'an states seven (Surahs, Nuh, 71:15; Aal-Mulk 67:3; Al-Mu'minun 23:86; Ha-Mim Al-Sajda 41:12; Bani Israil 17:44; Al-Talaq 65:12; and Al-Baqara 2:29).
6. Ishmael was offered on the altar by Abraham (GB 44). The Bible names Isaac (Gen. 22; James 2:21). The Qur'an infers Isaac as well who is twice named in the surah (Saffat 100-113).
7. Circumcision is necessary for eternal salvation (GB 23). The Bible teaches that circumcision is not necessary for eternal salvation (Acts 15: 1-16).
8. A Biblical quotation from the Prophet Ezekiel (33: 11) is attributed to the Prophet Joel (GB 165), and a prophecy mistakenly attributed to Ezekiel (GB 67) is actually from the Prophet Jeremiah (31: 31). Also attributed to the Prophet Daniel is an historical account found much earlier in I Kings 22. It is strange that Jesus, knowing the Old Testament so well, does not correct 'Barnabas', if he were

indeed the author of the record.

9. God is said to be the "God of Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac" (GB 212). The Old Testament consistently reads the "God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob".
10. Adam circumcised himself (GB 23). The Bible declares Abraham to be the first man circumcised (Gen. 17: 24).
11. The Gospel of Barnabas totally ignores the existence of the Prophet John the Baptist (Yaha Ibn Zakariyya), so prominent in both the Bible and the Qur'an, yet the very words of John (John 1: 27) are put into the mouth of Jesus (GB 42,96), an obvious plagiarism.
12. Jesus supposedly relates a dialogue between the Prophet Elijah and a blind man that nowhere exists in Biblical history (GB 116,117).
13. Stranger still is the statement in The Gospel of Barnabas that the Jewish high priest, and perhaps also Herod and Pilate, wished ...to bow himself down and worship Jesus...(GB 93). The high priest, it should be remembered was the chief enemy of Jesus and would not be about to worship Him for two reasons: 1) He considered Jesus guilty of blasphemy (Mark 14:63,64). 2) Jesus constantly convicted the priests of hypocrisy.

Other distortions and perversions in The Gospel of Barnabas could be exposed, but the above internal evidence ought to be sufficient to convince anyone of the false nature of this book. However, there are additional facts to be considered.

## V. External evidence

### A. Ancient Manuscripts

It is remarkable that there is no existing Gospel of Barnabas in the Greek language, the language of the orthodox Gospel writers. The source of the current translation into English is from an Italian manuscript now housed in the Imperial Library at Vienna. George Sale in the preface to the earliest translation of the Qur'an into English refers to a copy of The Gospel of Barnabas in Spanish which appears to have been, at least for a time, in his possession. (The text of the Italian manuscript contains numerous spelling errors, so perhaps the Spanish version is the original.) By contrast, more than 5,300 manuscripts of the Greek New Testament now exist, and more are likely to be discovered. No other document of antiquity begins to approach such numbers. In comparison, The Iliad by Homer, the authenticity of which no scholar contests, is a far second with only 643 manuscripts of the Greek poem still surviving.

Sale states that the Spanish version of The Gospel of Barnabas was a translation from the Italian by a Spanish Muslim named Mustafa de Aranda (Aranda, a town in northern Spain). The now lost Spanish version was prefaced, according to Sale, by the imaginary

story that the Italian text had been stolen by a monk, Fra Marino, from the papal library while Pope Sixtus V was having a little nap. After reading it Fra Marino became a Muslim. His theft was supposedly prompted by his eagerness to lay hands on the book ever since he had accidentally met with a writing of the Church Father Irenaeus in which he spoke against St. Paul, alleging for his authority a 'Gospel of St. Barnabas'. Nowhere, however, in the voluminous extant writings of Irenaeus is there mention of a Gospel of Barnabas. Furthermore, Irenaeus clearly recognizes Paul's writings as inspired and states succinctly that none but the accepted 'four' Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) were or ever had been given by God.

It was in 1907 that the Italian text of The Gospel of Barnabas was translated into English by Lonsdale and Laura Ragg. In their introduction to the work they provide evidence to the effect that the book was a Medieval forgery. Since then Arabic and Urdu translations have been produced, all, however, without the introduction by the Raggs. Lt. Col. M.A. Rahim (Pakistan) reprinted The Gospel of Barnabas in English in 1973, omitting the Raggs' introduction and substituting another from a different point of view.

A Gospel of Barnabas was listed in a decree attributed to Pope Gelasius I (492-495 AD), although the date of this decree and its genuineness are disputed. In this so-called Gelasian Decree a Gospel of Barnabas is rejected along with some 10 other Greek 'gospels' considered heretical. Had such a book been authored by the real Barnabas it would have undoubtedly been accepted as authentic, for Barnabas was held in high esteem everywhere. Whatever other references to an ancient Gospel of Barnabas there might be, there are no grounds whatsoever to equate it, if it existed, with the present Gospel of Barnabas under discussion here. Identical titles do not prove identical books.

## B. The Historical Barnabas

Barnabas, according to the New Testament, the only source of historical information available concerning him, was not an Apostle of Jesus. It is doubtful that he ever even saw Jesus. Barnabas' name is mentioned 28 times in the New Testament but never once in the fourfold Gospel portion. This is because he did not become a disciple until after Jesus' ascension and was called Barnabas (Son of Encouragement) by the Apostles some time later (Acts 4: 36). Jesus, had He known him, would have addressed him by his original name Joseph.

Paul and Barnabas had a temporary rift when they disagreed about young John Mark's suitability as a dependable traveling companion, but they never were at odds, as The Gospel of Barnabas makes them out to be, in matters of doctrine, which a careful review of the New Testament text will attest. Paul and Barnabas were in entire agreement as to the pure Gospel. And they both agree with the Apostle Peter who was a disciple and companion of Jesus (I Pet. 1: 3).

A legend has it that in 478 AD Barnabas appeared in a vision to the Bishop of Salanus (Cyprus) and said:



"You will find a cave and a coffin, because there my whole body has been preserved and a Gospel written in my own hand..." This quotation is only partial, for it continues in the original: "...which I received from the Holy Apostle and Evangelist Matthew."

So this Gospel, if it did indeed exist, was written by Barnabas but originated with Matthew, and for that reason could not possibly read like the present-day Gospel of Barnabas. It would unquestionably be in agreement with Matthew's canonical Gospel which, along with all the other New Testament writings, was accepted as genuine by the Christian Church by the year 200 AD and officially declared authentic by 382 AD. The Church Fathers up to and thereafter quoted extensively from all the New Testament books but not once from The Gospel of Barnabas. Nor did any Muslim scholar make reference to The Gospel of Barnabas until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is beyond reason that The Gospel of Barnabas, were it genuine, could have been squashed and hidden away for all those centuries.

Factually, no one knows what eventually happened to Barnabas. Tradition has him both in Alexandria and Rome. In fact, another apocryphal book, The Epistle of Barnabas (not to be confused with The Gospel of Barnabas), came from Alexandria. Other books as well have been attributed to Barnabas, such as the Acts of Barnabas, but none of them were ever acknowledged canonical or inspired. They have no correlation with the Gospel of Barnabas examined in this paper.

### C. Medieval Manuscript

The earliest known history of the Italian manuscript of The Gospel of Barnabas begins with its discovery or acquisition by a scholar named Cramer in Amsterdam, Holland in 1709 AD. It changed hands more than once before coming to rest in Vienna where it is now kept. This manuscript in the Imperial Library was written sometime in the 16<sup>th</sup> century AD according to experts who have examined its script, binding and paper. This in itself actually proves little, since it cannot be shown that it was translated from an earlier source. But it is significant that there is no reference or hint at all to any original source, be it Greek, Hebrew, Latin, Spanish, Arabic or whatever. Some marginal notes in blundering Arabic which betray a European hand, do appear, which only reinforces the conclusion that it could not be based on any other language (with the possible exception of Spanish since the Italian itself is weak).

It is highly suspect, therefore, that Mustafa de Aranda is himself the author of The Gospel of Barnabas because of the Medieval character of the text, as is apparent in the preceding section of this examination.

## VI. Conclusion

George Sale, Lonsdale and Laura Ragg, and every honest scholar who has given himself to an unbiased study of the book concur that The Gospel of Barnabas is nothing more than forgery. And every unprejudiced searcher after truth who will compare it with the authentic Gospel record in the New Testament will inevitably conclude the same.

It is not a book fitting to be used by Muslims or Christians because of its many inaccuracies and many misrepresentations of facts. The Gospel of Barnabas actually makes a parody of historical truth and is an insult to honest, intelligent men. In the search for authentic historical evidence for the true beginnings of Christianity it must be rejected as not having any objective value. When compared to the historical evidence supporting the validity of the Bible and especially the four gospel accounts in the New Testament, the Gospel of Barnabas cannot legitimately be compared to the Bible. It disqualifies itself as a historical source for the life and ministry of Jesus and only qualifies to be regarded as a curious piece of Medieval Muslim/Christian polemical literature.

## OTHER HELPFUL BOOKS AND BOOKLETS CONCERNING THE GOSPEL OF BARNABAS

Abdul-Ahad, Selim, and Gairdner, W.H.T. "The Gospel of Barnabas: An Essay and Inquiry." Hyderabad: Henry Martyn Institute of Islamic Studies, 1985.

Campbell, William F. "The Gospel of Barnabas: Its True Value." Rawalpindi: Christian Study Centre, 1989.

Gilchrist, John. "Origins and Sources of the Gospel of Barnabas." Brighton: FFM Publications, 1980.

Jadeed, Iskandar. "The Gospel of Barnabas: A False Testimony." Rikon, Switzerland: The Good Way.

Sox, David. "The Gospel of Barnabas." London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984.

"The Gospel of Barnabas." Edited and translated by Lonsdale and Laura Ragg. Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1907.